



Pregledni znanstveni članek Review scientific paper (1.02)
Besedilo prejeto Received: 28. 9. 2020; Sprejeto Accepted: 9. 10. 2020
UDK UDC: 27-23:26(430+436)
DOI: 10.34291/Edinost/75/02/Petschnigg
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Between Studying the Bible and Coping with the Past: Jewish-Christian Dialogue in the Post-council Period in Germany and Austria

Med preučevanjem Biblije in soočanjem s preteklostjo: judovsko-krščanski dialog v pokoncilskem obdobju v Nemčiji in Avstriji

Abstract: The decades following the tragedy of the Shoah marked a crucial turning point in how Christian theology would define its approach not only to Judaism but also to the first part of Scripture – the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible. Gradually, Christian churches had to confront their own centuries-old, anti-Jewish tradition and slowly came to the realization that Christianity's anti-Judaism and the Church's wide-spread silence in the face of the atrocities of World War II had contributed to the heinous crimes committed by the Nazi regime. Grassroot initiatives for a Jewish-Christian Dialogue are one significant result of that shift in mindset. This paper concentrates on Jewish-Christian Dialogue initiatives based on the Hebrew Bible, which were established in the years and decades after the Second Vatican Council in post-Nazi Germany as well as in post-Nazi Austria.

Key Words: Jewish-Christian Dialogue, grassroot initiatives, Post-council Period, Germany, Austria

Izvleček: Desetletja po tragediji šoa so pomenila ključno prelomnico v tem, kako bo krščanska teologija opredelila svoj pristop ne samo do judovstva, temveč tudi do prvega dela Svetega pisma – Stare zaveze ali hebrejske Biblije. Krščanske cerkve so se morale postopoma soočiti s svojo stoletno protijudovsko tradicijo in počasi so prišle do spoznanja, da sta krščansko protijudovstvo in razširjena tišina Cerkve ob grozodejstvih druge svetovne vojne prispevala h gnusnim zločinom, ki jih je zagrešil nacistični režim. Množične pobude za judovsko-krščanski dialog so pomemben rezultat tega premika v miselnosti. Ta članek se osredotoča na pobude judovsko-krščanskega dialoga, ki temeljijo na hebrejski Bibliji in so bile osnovane v letih in desetletjih po drugem vatikanskem koncilu v postnacistični Nemčiji in v postnacistični Avstriji.

Ključne besede: judovsko-krščanski dialog, množične pobude, obdobje po koncilu, Nemčija, Avstrija

Introduction

In light of current events, this article first looks at the present day: A series of anti-Jewish attacks on the synagogue in Graz and its president Elie Rosen in August 2020 show how much interreligious dialogue is necessary not only for theological but also for socio-political reasons. Three times in four days, a 31-year-old Syrian citizen, who was since arrested and confessed, attacked the synagogue of the Jewish community in Graz which was rebuilt in 2000 after it had been destroyed in 1938. On the first night of the attacks, he smeared pro-Palestinian slogans on parts of the outer wall, built of bricks from the former synagogue building. The second night, he smashed one of the large windows of the building, and the third time – this time in broad daylight – he attacked the president of the community in front of the church with a wooden club. Elie Rosen was able to escape into his car just in time. (Schmidt 2020)

Since the police initially did not monitor the synagogue after the damage had been caused to the property, it escalated further with a physical attack on the president of the Jewish community. About a day later, the attacker, who had been filmed by a surveillance camera, was arrested by a police patrol just a few streets away from the synagogue. Political actors, representatives of religious communities, and civil society reacted with horror to the anti-Semitic attacks in Graz. On August 23, 2020, a solidarity march organized by the Austrian Jewish Students' Union followed by a rally in front of the synagogue took place, and in a declaration published online, teachers, students, and employees of the Karl-Franzens University in Graz called for »resistance against all anti-Semitism« (Erklärung 2020).

Even before the attacks of August 2020, the police in Styria had observed an increase in anti-Semitism in right-wing and left-wing extremist groups as well as in Islamist milieus (Antisemitismus hat wieder zugenommen 2020). Not only in Austria, but also in the pan-European context, anti-Semitism often manifests itself in the form of anti-Zionism and anti-Israelism (Embacher, Edtmaier and Preitschopf 2019). As recent studies with regard to Austria show, anti-Semitic attitudes cannot be reduced to the »right margin« or parts of Muslim communities, but can also be found right in the »middle« of society (220).



This balance sheet shows that Jewish fellow citizens and their religious institutions continue to need special protection in Europe and that interreligious dialogue is a social necessity. From a Christian theological perspective, first and foremost the deep connection with Judaism and the rootedness of the younger religion in the older one must be emphasized. For centuries, this fact was not only overlooked, but rather a Christian substitution theology often led to an attitude of anti-Judaism, and even to forced conversions and pogroms. It was only the horror of the Shoah and the slow recognition of Christian joint responsibility in it – after all, the Christian-motivated hostility towards Jews had prepared the ground for the anti-Semitic ideology of the Nazi era – that led to a theological reorientation toward Judaism in both Austria and Germany. In both countries – and this article will highlight this in particular – Jewish-Christian discussion initiatives were established at the grassroots level after 1945, and they have pioneered work in the reorganization of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. It is important to keep these initiatives alive and to adapt them to current requirements.¹

1 The dialogue takes shape: The 1960s as a turning point

If the historian of religion, Gershom Scholem, considered the German-Jewish conversation to be a »myth«, which he regarded as having died in its beginnings in the period before the Second World War (Scholem 1964), it is all the more remarkable that it took shape in the post-war decades despite – or rather precisely because of – the burden of history in some places in Germany. The same applies, with a time lag, to Austria. It was the reflection on a common thematic starting point – the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament as a unifying basis for discussion – that made Jewish-Christian meetings in these countries possible in the first place. As Martin Cunz emphasizes, the beginning of dialogical efforts after 1945 is to be found primarily at the grassroots level:

1 The following explanations are based on the results of the author's dissertation (Petschnigg 2018), developed within the framework of a project financed by the Austrian Science Fund and conducted at the Department of Old Testament Studies, University of Graz (2012–2015). German quotations in this article have been translated into English by the author.



The Christian-Jewish dialogue – and on the Christian part also a new Christian theology of Judaism – did not spring from the minds and desks of scholarly theologians. Nor was it initiated by church administrations. Rather does it owe its beginnings and subsequent expansion, after 1945, to persons who had proved their worth in the course of the preceding dark historical and political events. [...] But the real fathers and mothers of the dialogue are, on the Christian side, simple pastors, members of monastic orders, men and women [...]. It is they who, after 1945, made a dialogue of churches and theologians with representatives of the Jewish people morally possible. (1988, 47)

However, impulses for a process of theological change can also be attributed to external events that moved the world in the early 1960s: on the one hand, the 1961/62 trial in Jerusalem of Adolf Eichmann, the former head of the Jewish Department of the Secret State Police and thus responsible for the deportation of European Jews, and on the other hand, the trials that also began in Germany of those responsible for the concentration camp crimes, especially the »Auschwitz trials« that began in Frankfurt am Main in 1963. These events began to prepare the ground for a new theological thinking with regard to Judaism. (Koschel 1999, 158)

For the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) marked an epochal turning point in its relationship to Judaism. It took decisive steps of renewal, both inwardly and outwardly, in the spirit of the *aggiornamento* demanded by Pope John XXIII. One of the most important results of the Council today is considered to be the reorganization of the Catholic Church's attitude toward non-Christian religions, especially Judaism, through the Council Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (NA). The document drafts a biblically based theology of Israel, which refers primarily to the Israel chapters of the Letter to the Romans (Rom 9–11) (NA 4). The relationship between the Church and the people of Israel thus has a unique character: as if by a marriage bond, the Church and Israel are inseparably linked. It is problematic, however, that the Old Covenant is seen merely as a preparation and the type for the people of the New Covenant, the Church. In such formulations, remnants of an old, triumphalist view of the Church can still be seen, although it must be noted that both NA 4 and other Council texts (*Lumen Gentium* 16) do not continue the substitution theology that has



been handed down for a long time, but explicitly refer to the permanent election of the covenant people of Israel. Another essential point is that a collective guilt of Jewish people for the death of Jesus is decisively rejected. Furthermore, *Nostra Aetate* condemns any form of anti-Semitism. (Renz 2014, 148–154)

Despite existing weaknesses, the Second Vatican Council laid the foundation for a renewal of the relationship between the Catholic Church and Judaism in a revolutionary manner. *Nostra Aetate* became one of the most important Council texts in the history of its reception, which set into motion a far-reaching renewal movement in Catholic theology and church life (Henrix 2013, 286–296). From the Jewish perspective, the declaration, by encouraging the faithful to dialogue and to engage in Bible study, showed »a golden path to future blessings« (Singer 2006, 191).

2 Oases of Encounter: Jewish-Christian grassroots initiatives in Germany and Austria

In the spirit of the epochal theological paradigm shift initiated by Vatican II, which also began in the Protestant churches in Germany and Austria from the 1960s onwards and culminated in the 1980 Rhenish Synod (e.g. Rendtorff 1986), women and men of different professions and different ages paved the way for Jewish-Christian dialogue at the grassroots level in the post-war decades. The Jewish-Christian dialogue took concrete shape through initiatives that established themselves in church educational institutions or in the university context from the late 1960s onwards. In the following, four of these encounter formats, which are characterized by decades of continuity, will be presented as examples, as well as a new initiative that ties in with one of these formats:

- The *Jewish-Christian Bible Week* in Bendorf on the Rhine (1969–2003) and in Georgsmarienhütte near Osnabrück (since 2004): This annual Bible Week, co-organized by the Leo Baeck College in London (initially in *Hedwig-Dransfeld-House* and since the closure of this educational institution in *House Ohrbeck*), is the pioneering initiative of Jewish-Christian encounter in post-war Germany (Koepler 2010, 115–255; Petschnigg 2018, 117–203).



- The *Austrian Christian-Jewish Bible Week* in Graz (1982–2007): Founded on the model of the Bendorfer Week, this initiative, which was located in the diocesan Mariatrost Educational Centre (*Bildungshaus Mariatrost*), also had a pioneering character for the Austrian context and was held every two years until its termination in 2007 (Petschnigg 2018, 203–270).
- The *Christian-Jewish Holiday College* in Nettetal, Aachen and Baesweiler-Puffendorf (1983–2012): This encounter initiative of the Episcopal Academy of the Diocese of Aachen took place in the *Eva-Kleinewefers-House* until 2005, after the closure of this house in Aachen and Baesweiler-Puffendorf; after the Holiday College in the year 2012, the format was discontinued (Petschnigg 2018, 270–331).
- The *Christian-Jewish Summer University* in Berlin (since 1987): The *Institute for Church and Judaism* at Berlin's Humboldt University organizes this international Jewish-Christian study week every two (or currently three) years as a university meeting format for students, but also for others interested in dialogue (Petschnigg 2018, 332–401).
- *Religious Discourses in Western Democracies – Initiative Christian-Jewish Study Week in Conversation with Islam* (since 2017) in Seggau near Leibnitz and Graz: This newly launched initiative, managed by the *Institute for Old Testament Biblical Studies* at the University of Graz, continues along with its predecessor initiative, the *Austrian Christian-Jewish Bible Week*, with updates and includes the conversation with Islam in a two-year cycle. The first two study weeks were held in the diocesan educational center at Seggau Castle near Leibnitz (Fischer, Langer and Petschnigg 2017; Petschnigg 2020, 117–121); the conference planned for the summer of 2021 will take place at the Steiermarkhof in Graz (<https://altes-testament.uni-graz.at/de/veranstaltungen/bibeldialoge/>).

All of these dialogue initiatives are based – with varying degrees of emphasis – on the study of the Hebrew Bible as a common basis for discussion linking Judaism and Christianity, and have enabled and continue to enable participants over generations to encounter and experience spaces that can hardly be found elsewhere, both from an interreligious and an ecumenical perspective.



3 The many roles of the Bible in dialogue: From an excuse to the centre

The Jewish-Christian dialogue at the grassroots level is a multidimensional event – not only in terms of its forms of expression, but also in terms of the importance attached to Bible study since the late 1960s. Initially, the Hebrew Bible provided the framework in which encounters could take place; it provided a solid justification for the fragile, historically charged dialogue. Particularly in the early years of Jewish-Christian dialogue, which were carried and shaped by members of the war and post-war generation, an exchange focussed on questions of Bible interpretation was usually only superficially at the centre of attention. In these years, the discussion of the National Socialist era was much more important. The joint Bible study, to which the participants were invited, provided a pretext, so to speak, for making a conversation between Jews and Christians in the post-National Socialist context possible at all (Petschnigg 2018, 422–435). The British Rabbi and psychotherapist Howard Cooper, for example, a frequent participant in the Bible Week of Bendorf and House Ohrbeck, clearly differentiated between the role of the Bible at the beginning and in later years of the dialogue initiative:

In the early years, there were a lot of tears from both sides. Now you get tears, but it is different. So the level of intensity of feeling and painful feeling in Jews and in Christians – that changed. And as that changed, I think the text came more to the centre. And the dramas of people's lives were always there; but they became less, they became more in the background. There was a move. If you think about personal life and text, originally, as I said, the text was the excuse. (Interview Cooper)

In the early years of Jewish-Christian study weeks, an asymmetrical distribution of roles between Jews as teachers and Christians as audiences often became apparent. This circumstance resulted from a diverse »web of asymmetries« (Thoma 1985) that shaped the composition of the participants. Over the years and decades, however, the need for both sides to come to terms with the past receded more and more, and joint Bible study became more central. Not only the Bible text itself, but also different approaches to Jewish and Christian Bible interpretation were increasingly



brought in and perceived, as, for example, the British Rabbi Daniel Smith describes:

Later on, I think [...] the Bible became more and more important. [...] We were able to look at the text more than at each other. That means that we could be interested in how Christians could approach the same story as the Jews. We would look at different ways of approaching the Bible and that became perhaps the centre of our meeting, more than Jews and Germans. That became less important. (Interview Smith)

With regard to the *Austrian Christian-Jewish Bible Week* in Graz-Mariatrost, for example, the retired Protestant pastor Heinz Stroh also observed a process of development that led to an ever greater respect for Judaism on the part of the Christian participants and enabled an increasing degree of authentic encounter:

Respect for the Jewish heritage has always grown, and I also feel that the way we deal with each other has been particularly fine and respectful in Mariatrost. There were no excesses where one could have been arrogant, or where there was not too much philo-semitic demonstration, so that the opposite then sloshed over into the opposite, but it was really a real encounter. (Interview Stroh)

To sum up, it can be said: The numerical imbalance between Christian and Jewish participants, combined with a Christian history of guilt, made it difficult in the early years of Jewish-Christian dialogue to conduct a dialogue on an equal level. With the increasing participation of members of the third and fourth post-war generations in Jewish-Christian grassroots initiatives, there has been a clear decline in the problems of guilt and trauma for some years now, and an atmosphere of discussion can be observed that is increasingly based on reciprocal exchange and makes it possible to seriously discuss biblical theological questions. (Petschnigg 2020)



Conclusion: How can dialogue work in the present and the future?

In the spirit of Vatican II, the founding mothers and fathers of the Jewish-Christian dialogue launched initiatives that not only pioneered theological work, but also enabled their participants to do some reconciliation work and to come to terms with the past. Thus, the founder of the *Austrian Christian-Jewish Bible Week*, historian and adult educator Erika Horn, summed it up from an autobiographical perspective: »It was such a joy and such a relief for me with this Bible Week that I succeeded in this.« (Interview Horn) For Rabbi Daniel Smith, the reconciliation aspect was also a priority: »The most important thing for me was the meeting with the Germans. [...] Also – and this sounds a bit too pious, but it is the truth – I did think we were doing messianic work.« (Interview Smith)

The Jewish-Christian dialogue has changed over the decades of its existence; it has matured. This is also made clear by Jewish responses to Christian dialogue efforts, such as the two Orthodox declarations *To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians* (2015) and *Between Jerusalem and Rome* (2017). However, dialogue is still a niche topic for interested and committed circles, and quite a few people today believe that it has essentially already achieved its goals (the analysis in Ahrens and Deeg 2020, 15–19). At the same time, a current discussion about the significance of the Old Testament in Christianity – the so-called »Slenczka controversy« – shows that some of the achievements of the Jewish-Christian dialogue of the last decades are apparently being called into question and must be spelled out again and again (e.g. Ahrens and Deeg 2020, 30). Awareness-raising and dialogical training² are still necessary in order not to fall back decades theologically. As always, a solidary commitment to the peaceful coexistence of religions is relevant – especially in view of the current anti-Semitic attacks on Jewish people and Jewish institutions in Austria and other European countries.

2 The practice of Jewish-Christian dialogue shows that if dialogue is to be successful and sustainable, certain conditions must be met on both sides. Based on empirically collected observations of actors in the dialogue, I believe that the following eight criteria can be defined for the success of a dialogue on an equal level: (1) knowledge about one's own tradition – (2) knowledge about the tradition of the other person and respect for it – (3) interest, curiosity, and openness – (4) acceptance of differences – (5) trust – (6) honesty and authenticity – (7) willingness to listen to each other – as well as (8) a common, interreligious preparation of events. (Petschnigg 2018, 452–468)



Newly founded dialogue initiatives (Ahrens and Deeg, 19), such as the *Christian-Jewish Study Week in Dialogue with Islam in Austria*, or long-standing initiatives that have been successfully brought into the present, such as the *Jewish-Christian Bible Week* in Germany or the *Hebrew Week* in Switzerland (Bible Weeks 2019, 219), make it clear that Jewish-Christian dialogue has a future. It has a solid foundation that has been built up over decades and on which present and future generations can build. It is therefore important to preserve what has been achieved and to be open to the needs of the present, also in spiritual terms. Dialogue has reached a point where we can talk to each other on an equal level and learn from each other. May the words of Rabbi Jehoschua Ahrens thus express the specificity of our present time and point the way to the future:

I believe that many people are not even aware of the historic times we are in at the moment! For the first time since the separation of Judaism and Christianity, we meet as equals. This makes a real dialogue possible, also a theological one. But much will probably only develop in the coming years, because we are only at the beginning. (Ahrens and Deeg 2020, 30)

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